



# BACK OFF, buddy

DON'T ROLL OVER THE NEXT TIME YOUR BOSS, BIG SISTER OR SO-CALLED FRIEND STARTS PUSHING YOU AROUND. HERE'S HOW TO STAND UP TO—AND OUTSMART—GROWN-UP BULLIES. **BY HILLARY QUINN**

I was fresh out of college and newly employed when, one day, my boss flew into my cubicle in a rage. "I need paper—now!" she yelled. Before I had a chance to react, she started rummaging around my desk. "You must have paper available at all times," she grumbled. "This is totally unacceptable."

My instinctive reaction—to take the hit—kicked in. *What did I do?* I wondered. Then I caught a glimpse of her face. She was frazzled and distracted. That's when I had one of those *aha* moments and realized that her over-the-top reaction had absolutely nothing to do with me. Calmly, I turned to her, smiled

and said, "I keep paper right here in my drawer." Caught off guard, she stopped her tirade in mid-sentence, and with a sheepish smile thanked me and left.

I learned a valuable lesson that day about killing someone with kindness: It works...even when you'd rather just kill the person. "Everyone exhibits occasional bullying behavior when under extreme stress, but if you treat them in a calming, comforting way, they usually settle down," says Daneen Skube, Ph.D., author of *Interpersonal Edge* (Hay House). Real bullies, however, spew

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Illustration: James Yang.



hostility and aggression 24/7 as a way of controlling those around them. They're fighting their way through life—and making everyone miserable.

Not unlike the aggressive kid on the playground, bullying adults are often clinging to bad habits from childhood and using those same techniques to intimidate employees, spouses, partners and friends. The general belief is that grown-up bullies throw their weight around to cover up low self-esteem, but

the fact is they actually gain confidence by browbeating people in the mistaken belief that fear equals power. Others are mimicking the behavior of their parents and treating everyone in the belittling fashion in which they were raised.

Learning how to handle the bullies in your world—be it a boss, friend or pushy PTA mom—is the key to not feeling victimized. Here are four common scenarios, along with strategies to help you stand your ground.

## 1 the competitive mom

**She boasts about her perfect kids, successful husband and fabulous car/jewelry/friends. But when you have good news, she trumps you by comparing your situation to hers, which is always better. You: "My daughter just got her green belt—she's so proud!" Her: "That's nice, but we took ours out of karate—it seemed so rough—and enrolled her in ballet. It's more elegant."**

**What's really going on** This mom only acts superior; deep down, she's got a serious inferiority complex. "She's desperate for approval and success," says Dr. Skube. "Maybe she grew up deprived or nobody praised her as a kid. Now she tries to make people feel small in order to boost her self-esteem."

**Best defense** Get her to own up to her comments by repeating what she says ("So you think my daughter is going to get hurt?"). Paraphrasing "forces the bully to come clean about her issues...or put a sock in it," says Dr. Skube.

## 2 the jealous friend

**She always seems to rain on your parade. She bad-mouths friends behind their backs and regularly criticizes you and others with a smile and a squeeze ("Love your new kitchen, but too bad about those appliances. This year's models are so much better").**

**What's really going on** Her critical commentary belies her own unhappiness. "Passive-aggressive remarks are the craftiest way to bully because they leave you wondering if she was really trying to intimidate you or if you're just being oversensitive," says Atlanta-based psychologist Erik Fisher, Ph.D., author of *The Art of Managing Everyday Conflict* (Praeger).

**Best defense** The next time you're together, be prepared for her criticism. If she does it out, respond in a way that gives her what she wants—"Thanks for the advice. I'll definitely keep it in mind"—so you're not caught up in a futile game of one-upmanship. You're not being a pushover, says Dr. Fisher. You're managing the situation by making a conscious decision to give this needy person the praise she craves.

## 3 the squabbling sibling

Your big sister is still pushing you around—at least verbally. Instead of arguing over what program to watch on TV, she now gives you unsolicited child-rearing advice, argues about who should host holiday gatherings and orders you around at family get-togethers.

**What's really going on** "Bossy behavior has to do with unresolved anger, sadness or anxiety from childhood that gets directed at the safest target—the sibling," says Dr. Skube. In many cases hostile siblings pick fights to get attention.

**Best defense** Make it clear you don't want to argue. Instead, ask for what you need ("For once, I'd like to hear what you enjoy about my kids"). Resist the temptation to psychoanalyze ("You're upset because Mom always favored me") or engage in name-calling.

## 4 the belittling boss

You can't seem to please this demanding person, who loves to humiliate workers by publicly pointing out their errors. You're beginning to wonder whether she intentionally misinforms people so that she can then step in and save the day.

**What's really going on** Bullying bosses believe that withholding information so an employee can't perform well—as well as other forms of subtle sabotage—makes them appear more competent to the higher-ups. "It's a classic, misguided attempt to be a shining star," says Patricia Sias, Ph.D., a workplace communications expert at Washington State University in Pullman.

**Best defense** Stroke your boss' fragile ego by making her feel as if she's playing the role of your mentor. For example, flatter her with comments that play up her expertise, such as, "That's a great idea—I didn't think of that" or "I'd appreciate it if you could critique my spreadsheet before the next client meeting." "Some bosses believe their job is to teach you, not compete with you," says Dr. Sias. "Once you remove the threat of competition, you have a better chance of being helped instead of undermined." ●